

‘Such a ceremonial perversion!’  
Baroque, Capitalism, and *A Mouthful of Birds*

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ABSTRACT

*The baroque culture of the seventeenth century has considerable affinities with the culture industry of late capitalism. This paper focuses on Caryl Churchill and David Lan’s A Mouthful of Birds, premiered by Joint Stock at Repertory Theater in 1986, and tries to discover the baroque elements the play incorporates. This study is mainly concerned with the text of the play and does not deal with its performance or choreography. The writers aim to show that Churchill’s play is informed with baroque techniques, which although at times make compromise with the premises of capitalism, yet enhance its potential to criticize the culture industry of late capitalism.*

*Key words: Caryl Churchill; A Mouthful of Birds; Baroque; culture industry of late capitalism; 1980s England*

INTRODUCTION

Several critics have examined Churchill’s plays from the time they were premiered. Elaine Aston<sup>1</sup>, Elin Diamond<sup>2</sup>, Janelle Reinelt<sup>3</sup> and Amelia Howe Kritzer<sup>4</sup> have all written books on Churchill’s plays. Among them, there are a few who have carried out an exclusive study of *A Mouthful of Birds*. Libby Worth has written about the choreography of this play and has analysed it in performance. Elin Diamond has written about this play in a chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*. She considers the way Churchill tries to represent terror through choreography. Diamond’s work is informed with, although it does not directly address, the issue of political opposition and it points to the play’s critique of capitalist consumerist culture. Some dissertations have also been produced on Churchill’s theatre examining her plays’ politics of sex, gender and body; Kerri Ann Considine<sup>5</sup> has written a Master of Arts thesis on three of Churchill’s plays and has studied them in regard to Antonin Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. *A Mouthful of Birds* is the first work studied in this thesis. Iris Joy Lavell<sup>6</sup> has also worked on Churchill in her doctoral dissertation, but she only deals with her three marginal plays. Laura Leigh Whitaker<sup>7</sup> has also studied subjectivity and agency in Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*. Other works of similar quality have been produced, centring on *Top Girls* or *Cloud Nine*, almost all dealing with the question of women, madness and suffering. One scholarly article exclusively written on Churchill’s *A Mouthful of Birds*<sup>8</sup> by Raima Evans analyses the four female characters in this play from a feminist perspective and proposes a new thesis that questions some of the previous interpretations of the same scenes.

This article intends to open up a new perspective to the play, viewing it as an incorporation of baroque elements. Although the baroque is studied in regard to contemporary cultural condition, like in Gregg Lambert or Christine Buci-Glucksmann, a practical case study of literary cultural artefacts informed with baroque techniques is not carried out yet. In this article, the writers have focused on the representation of the visual

aspect of the play, highlighting violence that leads to fragmentation and alienation. Further, by contextualizing these baroque effects within the capitalist culture of the 1980s Britain, the article proposes the play makes use of the baroque techniques to criticize capitalism which shares fragmentation and alienation of subject positions with the baroque. By reading the play in the light of the baroque, the writers try to show how human mentality reacts in similar fashion to authoritarian socio-political forces that seek to bend human will and power; “the melancholy mentality of the baroque” is the outcome of a constant totalitarian nightmare (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, p. 9), veiled in the apparel of democracy and freedom. To this aim, the writers need to select a definition of the baroque from a range of meanings suggested through the history of this term. The baroque has different imports for different scholars and the scope of its meaning ranges from strictly limited and time/place specific to historically sweeping and typological. Jacob Burckhardt and Ulrich von Williamowite-Moellendorf, Ludwig Pfandl, F. W. Schirmer, Werner P. Friederich and Paul Meissner are among critics for whom the baroque is exclusively a seventeenth century phenomenon, while Croce, Eugenio d'Ors and Spengler view the baroque as a historical possibility. The typological view of the baroque goes into extremes when it claims that all cultures experience a baroque phase, thus making a topsy-turvy world out of the baroque. In this article, we consider the baroque as a possibility that can also be detected in works of art other than those of the seventeenth century. However, we do not follow the loose line of argument that sees in any art form a trace of the baroque. Obviously, there are reasons for the writers to analyse this work through such a perspective.

Churchill has written *A Mouthful of Birds* with a strong choreography based on J. S. Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. This piece of music is recognized as a masterpiece of the baroque music. She has also written a play by the name *Fugue* and has at least two works that deal with the socio-political atmosphere of the seventeenth century<sup>9</sup>. However, we do not propose that this play draws intentionally on baroque techniques of art or is influenced by the baroque. But due to similarities in the spirit of the seventeenth century with that of late capitalism, it would be fruitful to investigate the work from this view point. Such an outlook can help broaden our view of the baroque as well as the play.

## DISCUSSION

Bryan S. Turner in his introduction to Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *Baroque Reason*, draws an analogy between consumerist culture of late capitalism and the culture of the baroque in the seventeenth century. Late capitalism is a tortuous term that many have tried to define, yet it seems to elude definition. Fredrick Jameson, one of the most acute critics of postmodernism, equates late capitalism with “spectacle or image society”, which aestheticizes reality and makes real hyper-reality (Jameson 1991, p. XVII). In line with Jameson, Turner argues that the baroque culture as an ethos of spectacle and pleasure-induced conformity resembles the spectacular world of capitalist consumerism, in which as Deleuze and Guattari state, the ever repeated myth of “the poor man strikes rich” is reproduced infinitely (Turner 1994, pp. 24-5; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 20). In this paper, we will try to show this attitude at work in a play that is produced at the peak of capitalism in England and is known as a political work of opposition and critique. What we would add to this thesis is that the baroque elements, which are seemingly allied with capitalistic philosophy, give considerable impetus to the critical potential of the play under consideration, although at times they reveal acquiescence to capitalistic mores of

“valorization of capital” that leads to subjugation of human will and identity as well (Mandel 1978, p. 147).

More than a century has passed from the time when Heinrich Wölfflin re-conceptualized the baroque in his work *Renaissance and Baroque* and talked of the baroque as the product of an age that had a “daring and creative” aesthetic sensibility (Soergel 2005, p. xiv). The same sensibility, of experimentation and daring individuality, which gave birth to the classics of art and literature in the seventeenth century, Jonathan Raban detected in contemporary England. In his account of life in the London of the 1970s, *Soft City*, he addressed the quality of private and social life in London from a new perspective. He recognized the change that had occurred in the urban structure of London, and discovered a new social sensibility that refused classification based on “social class and occupation”, and instead emphasized the role of “appearance, individuality and entrepreneurism” (Harvey 1989, p. 3). Furthermore, the characteristics that he enumerated for life in London late in the twentieth century, strike a substantial similarity with Wölfflin’s arguments in his *Renaissance and Baroque*. The Wölfflinian topos of *the world as theater*, *the world as labyrinth* and *the world as a stage* seem to be rightly applicable to the urban system of London (Harvey 1989, p. 5). But what disturbs Raban’s account of city life in London is the repeated story of “urban violence”, “psychosis” and “totalitarian nightmare” as the side narrative to the story of “liberated human identity” and “playfulness” (Harvey 1989, p. 6), all familiar terms in the context of the baroque.

Autocratic cultures, such as the baroque, seek to make their subjects forget their individual selves and become obedient to “directives” (Maravall 1986, p. 72). In the seventeenth century and at the peak of baroque sensibility, “self-forgetfulness” was encouraged by controlling people’s free time through determining to what kind of art works they would get exposed. In the baroque era special art works received subsidies, while the works that did not concede to the norms of the authority were banned. State sponsored works focused on the theme of freedom, and did all they could to give the audience the feeling that they were uninhibited. Lope de Vega<sup>10</sup> speaks of the attempts of the authorities to “penetrate into the innermost interiority of the consciousness (Maravall 1986, p. 72)”

the sovereignty of those who rule ‘has been extended to want to subordinate also our understandings and to persuade us that we should obey and serve not only with the members of our body but also with our reason, giving to all their decisions the same credit as to the decisions of God, and frequently in contradiction with these latter and with the natural laws on which they are based’ (Maravall 1986, p. 77)

In the statement quoted from Lope de Vega in Maravall, the general belief about the baroque as an art of absolutist sensibility, product of dictatorial Catholic rule in the seventeenth century is explicated clearly. Maravall himself believes “the baroque is a glorification of the established powers. It is the art of authoritarian regimes . . . that dominates the awed spectator and carries him or her away so that one forgets to doubt and question” (Maravall 1986, p. 143). This view of the baroque, as an art accomplice with the ruling powers, relegating it to a utilitarian art, has been a major reason for its disregard and marginalization throughout history of art and literature.

Unlike the prevailing conception of the baroque, many baroque artists of the seventeenth century wrote for the masses and their intention was to *guide* their wills<sup>11</sup> (Maravall 1986, p. 231). Lope de Vega himself penned a baroque play<sup>12</sup>, *The Gardener's Dog*, which plays on the popular fable of the dog in the manger. By using oral traditions in a seriously critical play, he allowed in an audience excluded from serious considerations.

Bernini's famous *Santa Teresa*<sup>13</sup>, the most illustrious Catholic baroque sculpture, is also layered with "popular kitsch" (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, p.23). Although "incorporating that which [it] aim[s] to contest", the mass elements within the baroque open it to deconstruction (Linda Hutcheon 1988, p. 3). Moreover, despite all attempts, especially from the part of Catholic churches and the monarchs to maintain this absolutist culture, the time of this ideology is past. Therefore, it becomes evident that a counter-culture baroque was possible and practiced.

Protestant baroque edifices, with all decorations removed from their colossal buildings, were an attack on the Catholic baroque sensibility. Unlike catholic baroque architecture that aimed at "harness[ing] the worshipper's gaze" and overwhelming him with its awesome grandeur and colossal size, protestant baroque works of art resist this attitude (Soergel 2005, p. 5). As is evident from a baroque building built by Protestants, like the New Town Hall built in the seventeenth century in Amsterdam, the structure "invites participation in public life", while a catholic structure has no respect for Republicanism or worldly success, and thus just aims at "overawing the subject" (Soergel 2005, p. xv).

Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* was written in an Anglican world, and Anglican Church has more affinities with the Catholic Church than the Protestant<sup>14</sup>. However a medley of both Catholic and Protestant tendencies is detectable in Churchill's art, though she may be a secular playwright. The Catholics prize sensory experiences and for them vision is the acme of all senses. Consequently, their arts make use of the power of vision to entangle the attention and feelings of the audience. Protestants, on the other hand, value the word and therefore their art is more concerned with literature than sculpture or painting (Soergel 2005, p. 356-7). Capitalism shares this tendency with the Catholics to accentuate visual experiences. Guy Debord in his work *The Society of the Spectacle*, talks of the quality of contemporary life as mediated by the manipulative power of the spectacle, which is not solely image or representation, but an ambience of powerful commodity relations. Hence, the society of the spectacle is a "social relation between people that is mediated by images" due to the emergence of mass media and exposure of the masses to the manipulative power of its images (Debord 1994, p.7). The same manipulation through images was widely practiced in the seventeenth century under the rubric of baroque Catholic painting.

Churchill has incorporated strong visual and sensory experiences in *A Mouthful of Birds*, mostly enacted on the stage by dramatization of acts of violence. However, just like English baroque art, *A Mouthful of Birds* tries to modulate between the two worlds of Protestant internal experience and Catholic external practices. Through introducing an internal and deeper layer to the surface of theatrical action, Churchill finds counterpoise to the ocular presentation of the story. While the dualities Churchill introduces are not limited to this one pair, yet inner and outer world constructions play a significant part in characterising the play as an interventionist baroque drama. We will get back to this issue.

The city revolution of the 1980s, known as the Big Bang, developed a new urban structure in England. Deregulation of the market, with the aim of boosting London's economic power on an international basis, allowed unimpeded rivalry and destroyed the traditional ethos of "loyalty, paternalism and long, leisurely lunch" (Kynaston 2011)<sup>15</sup>. John Campbell, in his biography of Margaret Thatcher, refers to this new world as unrecognizable (Kynaston 2011). The feeling of living in an unknown cultural mien alienates people from their surroundings and estranged subjects feel beside themselves (Maravall 1986, p. 213). Yet, the baroque mentality of irredeemable transmogrification of the world was not the only outcome of this almost overnight change. It also instigated a second rift in the history of this nation<sup>16</sup>.

As Liza Filby<sup>17</sup> argues, Thatcherism separated the Tories from their allies in the Church of England, and this rift, in Filby's terms, resulted in "hostility between church and conservative party in the 1980s" (Filby 2010, p.16). As a result, while the conservative party supported liberal capitalistic politics and moved towards individualism, the church maintained a communal stance. The theme of individuality against mass or communal experience also pervades many of Churchill's plays (Presada). Churchill criticizes the bourgeoisie and their capitalistic mores and condemns their laxity of communal feelings<sup>18</sup>. Thus, some of her plays accentuate radical individualism through adopting a fragmented structure.

*A Mouthful of Birds* is composed of disjointed parts and Churchill disrupts the traditions of theatre by refusing to give an overall unifying scheme to the play. Consequently, two contradictory trends run side by side in her work. On the one hand, her play seems to glorify centerlessness, which is reminiscent of socialist tendencies to reject leadership and hierarchy. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the scenes draws on liberal and anti-conservative notions of individuality. Thus, although Churchill is loyal to socialist ideals, yet a liberal trend is also detectable in her play. The socialist trend however, is stronger in her earlier plays while in the 1990s and after, she seems disenchanted with socialist ideals (Diamond & Aston 2009, p.6). *A Mouthful of Birds* is an early work of Churchill that evidences signs of disillusionment with socialism and therefore it comes as no surprise to see it armored with postmodern techniques.

Individualism is a characteristic of the modernist culture, while postmodernism exceeds mere alienation and swerves into fragmentation (Jameson 1991, p.14). Fragmentation, as a radical form of alienation, is the consequence of a baroque culture as well. The baroque people are often alienated from their selves and surroundings and contemplate death and decadence (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, p. 23), hence the mind of a baroque subject is filled with contemplation of corruption. Capitalism also produces a similar mentality among its subjects. The global network of the world evades understanding and overawes the masses and the result is only, in Fredric Jameson's term, "high-tech paranoia":

the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hook up are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind (Jameson 1991, p. 38).

*A Mouthful of Birds* is fragmented in structure, yet the spatial politics of the play do not remain loyal to a capitalistic culture. Although capitalism has disseminated a sense of contingency and borderlessness, in practice, specific locations are central to capitalism's viability and endurance. Through specifying spatial identities, capitalism succeeds in "exploit[ing] minute spatial differentiations to good effect" (Harvey 1989, p. 294). The characters of *A Mouthful of Birds* are experiencing fragmentation, documented in the play by the experience of possession, which leads to their alienation from their environment. Yet they retain a sense of continuity with their inner selves, which the play dramatizes by translating their mentality into material forms. This continuity can best be justified in terms of the baroque and a critique of double standards of capitalism. From one hand, the play introduces fragmentation into its world and on the other hand suggests continuity among seemingly fragmented parts.

Fragmentation and compression, as questions of space politics, enter the scene of geopolitics from the 1970s (Harvey 1989, p.284). While postmodern space is compressed, the baroque space is nuanced. The baroque space is never limited to what is represented on the

canvas or on the stage. There is always a feeling of transcendence hidden in it, as if the canvas does not provide enough space for the depiction of the intended scene. Baroque art erases the border between here and there by suggesting continuity of spaces, of worldly experience and transcendental knowledge. Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* introduces a number of dialectics and at the same time invites us to see them all as contingent. The spirit that symbolizes Lena's inner psychic struggle takes on material form and tussles with her. Yvonne's inner desires and temptations assume material form and appear before her as two women dressed in party gowns with golden shoes. Dan's belief in the identity of God, "I do not believe God is necessarily male" (Churchill 1986, p. 7) acquires form when he, dressed in a petticoat starts dancing dangerously and kills his/her audience. In a surreal moment in the play, Doreen's "No" to Tony, although uttered in a low voice, as if she is trying to hide her anger, becomes so forceful that it hits Tony vehemently against the wall. Paul's love for a pig also reveals itself by scenes of dance with the pig, while he is the only character to see this dance. In all of these cases, characters engage in a relation with the unreal, while the unreal is represented with such material force and visual strength on the stage that, it seems, it transcends its place as non-material, non-human to supplant human will and power. Therefore, what Debord said of the society of the spectacle reveals itself in the contingency of the material and the human, in which the human factor is subservient and consents to defeat. Moreover, when we take the structure of the play into consideration, it is possible to say that the play refuses a total breakdown into unrelated fragments. The mythological streak that runs throughout the work acts like the torn string of a rosary that is trying hard to pull together the beads. *A Mouthful of Birds* is heavily based on Euripides's *Bacchae* and Churchill in her introduction to the play makes this clear: "*A Mouthful of Birds* was a show for Joint stock, and took Euripides' *Bacchae* as a starting point" (Churchill 1986, p. I); in this way, the fragmented scenes of the play do not fall apart and remain the parts of the same play throughout. Therefore, *A Mouthful of Birds* makes use of baroque techniques of erasing the contours of inner, transcendent experience and outer, material forms of experience, to condemn capitalism's desire to impose boundaries and classifications on space while hiding its intentions under the rubric of globalisation and contingency.

The illusion of authority capitalism makes by promising a free market and the free choice to buy and sell best reveals itself in the scenes where Paul has fallen in love with a pig. He is a successful businessperson, but this very success has driven him away from humanity. His failure to communicate with her mother-in-law shows how bounded and enclosed he is in the world of money. However, his waking up out of the nightmare of capital, comes itself, ironically, with a new trance, in which Paul is asleep to the world. In none of the two states, Paul has authority over his life; his behaviour, verbal or physical, is determined by the system in which he is living. Churchill, by refusing to solve Paul's problem alerts the audience to the gravity and urgency of capitalistic definitions of success. Thus, the play refuses total submission to the naturalised ideology of fragmentation propagated by capitalism. The irony is that the idea of spatial compression and fragmentation, which Churchill uses to make a critique, is itself a by-product of capitalist geopolitics.

The fragmented world of *A Mouthful of Birds* is centerless. Not only does the whole play avoid a center of attention or a totalizing story, but the absence of a protagonist also adds to the feeling that the branches of this tree shoot everywhere on the surface. The play gives the audience a feeling of vertigo, as if being plunged in a world where they have no grasp of its hows and whys. As a result, the play leaves the audience in an abyss of meanings. Reticence of the play - language is reductive and dialogues fail to take shape and veer into monologues and as a result communication is interrupted - along with its mundane events, delude the audience into thinking the play reaches for no meaning or is a mere parade of

elements without any depth. However, Churchill's political stance obliges her to have recourse to sound meanings and avoid submission to capitalism's glorification of flatness and superficiality. Therefore, Churchill, like a baroque artist, uses surface to conceal her meanings. Nevertheless, the surface she uses as a veil is not characterized by baroque grandiloquence. To put into practice Artaud's theory, she does her best to diminish the role of language in her plays (Presada 2009). So figurative prose and metaphoric layers of meaning do not play a part in the theatre of Churchill. Yet, Churchill recreates those moments of "emergency" in history in which "barbarism" is evoked and through it "the repressed memory of 'those without a name' is rewritten" (Egginton 2010, p. 54) and with these moments of barbarity, she evokes the ostentatiousness of the baroque. Strength of madness in the world of the seventeenth century baroque was so huge that people "walk[ed] through the streets as if madmen and spellbound, looking at each other<sup>19</sup>" (Maravall 1986, p.151). Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* is also about people experiencing possession and madness.

Unlike capitalism that seeks homogenization of the subjects and imposes mass identity on them, the baroque tries to revive the voice of the oppressed from the ruins of history. This act of restoration is not possible but with exertion of great force and violence. However, Churchill is aware that on the way to revitalize their identity, victims may grow to be new victimizers. Yvonne is an instance of a historically muffled voice and Churchill tries to include the marginal subjectivities into the historical narrative through characters like her. Though Yvonne is blocked out for being an alcoholic female, Marcia is at a disadvantage for being both an underprivileged and a black skin. Doreen is also a prototype of 'the mad woman in the attic', who refuses to stay caged. The entire characters struggle violently with the identity society has assigned them and consequently on the way, both Yvonne and Lena experience the emergence of their bestial selves.

Although all female characters struggle with their surroundings to reinvent their identity, the outcome for them is varied, in a way that no one can be regarded as successful in fighting back history. Yvonne, in her last monologue, has lost her job as an acupuncturist. She works at a butcher's; a man's job. However, she has abilities recognized by "all men". In this monologue, Yvonne has changed greatly. No longer does she dream. She has recovered sobriety and keeps her feet on the ground: "when I was young I'd dream. I'd wake and forget. Now I sleep, wake, I'm here" (Churchill 1986, p. 51). She has succeeded in reconciling her world with the larger world outside, but her life is mechanical and violent. Marcia is quite dreamy at the end of the play. She is still weighting the possibility of leaving her job and going back home to her native land. "My boat is twenty foot long, twelve foot wide, too small to sail far out" (Churchill 1986, p. 52). She remains the most vulnerable character throughout the play. While other women are capable of expressing rage and acting violently to show their dissatisfaction, she can only contemplate escape. She dreams of perambulation in starry nights. Her choice is running away from daylight, men's world and civilization and returning to the nocturnal nature. She does not try to bring these two worlds into communion. Doreen is still a secretary. Mentally she is still the same: full of rage. "I can find no rest. My head is filled with horrible images...it seems that my mouth is full of birds which I crunch between my teeth" (Churchill 1986, p. 53). Her example reveals that with all attempts at bringing change to the life of women, they are still disadvantaged, yet still fighting.

However, the example of Lena may draw the meanings to different directions. Agave, a character in Euripides's *Bacchae*, has possessed Lena. But unlike her, when Lena kills her child, she is not burdened and does not suffer. She remembers how she killed her daughter and admits that she enjoyed doing it. The monologue in which Lena professes her guilt and shows no motherly feelings and no human remorse, "I have not forgotten anything. I remember I enjoyed doing it. It's nice to make someone alive and it's nice to make someone

dead. Either way. The power is what I like best in the world. The struggle is every day not to use it” (Churchill 1986, p. 51), along with the violence spectators witness on the stage, leads the audience to think the play is an affirmation of women’s madness and histrionic behavior, as is represented throughout history, and thus the play justifies the exclusion of women and minorities (like Marcia) from history. Some critics have tried to convince the audience that Lena’s assertions regarding the murder of her child should not be taken as an acknowledgement of infanticide<sup>20</sup>. Her monologue at the end of the play takes on an exaggerated and radical stance towards the role of women and motherhood, claiming she had enjoyed the murder. The assertion is so radical that it cannot be taken literally.

William Egginton believes two strategies are at work in a baroque art form that make it possible for the work to become critical of prescribed notions of reality; major strategies and minor strategies. The major strategy strives to represent its version of reality as ultimate Reality and hide other versions. But some minor layers of the work exaggerate the truth of these surface realities and since the emphasis is too theatrical, the major strategy’s approval of these realities becomes ironic (Egginton 2010, p.5-6). Thus while a baroque work of art dupes the audience at the first glance, it tries to inform them that they have been duped. In case of *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill gives an ironic edge to Lena’s assertions and invites the audience to think whether she means what she says.

Caryl Churchill in her plays, probes into the importance of body and its experiences. Hence, “human sensorium”<sup>21</sup>, to borrow a term from Paul Virilio (James 2007, p.108), is a crucial part of Churchill’s theatre. She intensifies the bodily experience through doing violence to the body and creating extreme sensory experiences. *Owners* is full of bodily violence. In *Fen*, Angela makes Becky drink boiling water. And in the same play, a story is narrated in which a farmer axes the naked bodies of two adulterous couple to death. In *Traps*, characters go through a ritual of bathing in a tub and discuss the coldness or warmth of the water. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, Yvonne has stabbed her mother repeatedly and Lena kills her child. Consequently, the play translates madness, as the outcome of a repressed memory, into physical experience of violence.

Violence as a subjective experience is accentuated by exerting violence on the structure of the play as well. The globalized culture of the late twentieth century enforces violence on both space and time. As David Hardy discusses in his study of the culture of the second half of the twentieth century, in the 1980s and the 1990s “an intense phase of time-space compression” is experienced which “accelerated the collapse of borders and facilitated cultural globalization” (284). Time compression and erasure of time boundaries, specifically evoked by stitching a mythic layer to the structure of *A Mouthful of Birds*, intensifies the experience of cruelty by exposing the audience not only to a visual experience of bodily violence, but through framing the audience’s mental experience of the fictional world as necessarily compressed. In this cruel world, the subjects are “inserted” into “radically discontinuous realities” which leads to “fragmented and schizophrenic decentring and dispersion of the subjects”<sup>22</sup> (Harvey 1989, p.477).

Lena is an example of such schizophrenic character. The spirit that has possessed her, whispers her longings in her ears. What Lena yearns after generates an occasion of mental violence resulting from disgust: “His hair smells. His/eyes have got yellow in/the corners. His ears/have got hairs on. His/nose has got big pores” (Churchill 1986, p.12). There are also continuous acts of struggle between Lena and the spirit while both are trying to dominate her body. The spirit turns into a frog and Lena transforms into a snake. The frog turns into a lover and then becomes a wild animal and attacks her neck while embracing her. The wild animal again changes, this time, into a train and as she blocks his way, the train transforms into a wild bird. This time she changes into a baby bird and winning the giant bird’s affection turns



into a panther and eats him, but he leaps with a roar and this transformation scene is over (Churchill 1986, p.11-2). In both instances, the body is a medium of change and since the changes are radical, transformations are an example of exerting violence on the body. These transformations are the materialization of Lena's mental experiences and therefore her body remains "docile"<sup>23</sup> to her psychic struggles.

The event – transformation – is so highlighted that the background recedes. In fact, there is no background to this scene and it seems like a dark canvas on which these acts of violence occur. The intensity of the changes and the great dynamism of the scene evoke the representation of body in the baroque paintings of Caravaggio. In his painting of Saul<sup>24</sup>, the apostle is depicted at a moment when he falls from his horse on the ground. While his servant is looking puzzled at his master's reaction, the beholder sees Saul extend his arms towards a source of light. His face is almost expressionless, while his body is "foreshortened" and seems to "project out from the picture plane into the viewer's space". The moment of receiving miracle is pictured as purely an internal event to which the external body is unresponsive (Soergel 2005, p.472). In Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds*, all characters undergo internal psychic transformations, yet they give no clue to people around them about the intensity of their inner experiences. Lena struggles with a spirit at the same time she is discussing things with her husband. Yet her behaviour is no help to Roy to understand her mental turbulence. While Caravaggio reveals the existence of such inner turmoil by the use of Chiaroscuro, the play points to it by bringing a supernatural being into contact with an ordinary being. In both cases extremities are juxtaposed – light and darkness, natural and supernatural – to invite the audience to participate in deriving meanings out of the works. In other words, baroque works of art entangle the senses to encourage thought and deliberation (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, p.60). While critics like Guy Debord<sup>25</sup> and Christine Buci-Glucksmann believe authoritarian regimes, like the baroque, produce a passive mass, plunged in ennui (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, p. 25) there are many baroque works of art that try to engage their audience with the art product and allow them participate in meaning construction. In other words, while capitalism tries to delude the masses with its culture of spectacle and surface, the baroque tries to inform them that spectacle and surface can be manipulative.

Caravaggio's, *The Calling of Saint Matthews* (1599-1600) depicts the contrary feelings of quietude and acceptance of violent death. The rapid changes of images in the transformation scene of *A Mouthful of Birds* also debacle any chance for emotionally charged expressions and therefore the audience sees a series of violent acts without expression of pain. The feeling of inertia in face of abuse is one of the themes Churchill explores in some of her plays such as *Objections to Sex and Violence*, *Owners*, *Traps*, *Top Girls* and *Fen*. In *Fen*, Frank is so given to mental violence and static bodily existence that his only encounter with the landowner is a spectacle of mental fight in which he finally ends hitting himself (Diamond 1997, p. 91). Paul in *A Mouthful of Birds* forsakes his capitalistic desires for a new sense of total inertia. Capitalism channels the energies of people by exposing them to its cultural products and determining their taste through fashion, so that they would not use it for critique or opposition. In fact, by means of this cultural illusion and the logic of capitalism, the consumerist culture is justified and a form of inertia is generated in people, while people themselves feel they are more active than ever. However, through the baroque exaggeration of surface acts, Churchill does not give a chance to sympathy for inertia to grow in the audience and in this way she succeeds in promoting critical attitudes to capitalism among the audience.

The baroque worldview shares another characteristic with the culture of the 1980s. In this drama of possession and seduction, all women are "trapped" in a "radical alterity" (Gane

2000, p. 70). This feeling of being entrapped and confined within one's self is instigated and perpetuated, in the case of Lena, by the experience of maternity. In part two of the play named *psychic attack*, where the audience meets Lena and Roy, they are having a humdrum dialogue. At the same time Lena is experiencing what Churchill in her short 1997 introduction to the play calls the state of being "beside [one]self" (Churchill). A male spirit constantly whispers in Lena's ears, ordering her to kill her little baby. This feeling of entrapment drives Lena into murdering her child.

Infanticide in Churchill's plays transcends the mere feminine relations of mothers and daughters and takes on a socio-political significance. The "acquisitive drive of capitalist culture" leads a mother into seeing her child as her possession, something she has created and has the power to annihilate. Churchill asks whether the act of infanticide can be interpreted as an action taken against the "acquisitive drive of capitalism" in which the mother does not allow this attitude guide her and therefore is capable of killing the child, or depriving herself of that atavistic acquisitive drive to her child (Howard 2009, p.38). Or whether this act of infanticide reveals the other face of acquisition in which individuals see themselves the sole possessors of something and therefore justify their choice of keeping it or wasting it. Lena disregards the fact that the child she has given birth to is also Roy's child and thus her view of herself as a demigod is flawed. Infanticide can also be the sign of a society dominated by capitalistic values of disposability in which not only goods but also "values, life-styles, stable relationships, and attachment to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being" can be easily disposed of (Harvey 1989, p. 286).

The baroque culture emerged in cities that had already developed a mass culture, and just like capitalism, it grew in countries where large cities had more than ever separated people from each other and had caused loneliness (Maravall 1986, p. 78). While the baroque subjects are overwhelmed by their interiority, they always retain a hope for a utopia. The illusion of transcendence that is created in the baroque works of art is a reminiscent of this utopian thinking (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, p.60). The baroque evokes its desired utopia by images of Angels and the transcendence, agents that escape ordinary human classifications, and are recognized as the Other. Capitalism induces a utopian desire in its subjects by other means, like androgyny and bisexuality (Buci-Glucksmann 1994). Dionysus, Herculine Barbin and Dan, as instances of the Other, the repressed and the marginalized which are called upon to rupture the progression of history, are instances of this contemporary baroque utopianism. They stand for a chance to interrupt the dominant voice of history and as Hamlet once said, to "tak[e] arms against a sea of troubles, and, by opposing end them" (Shakespeare act 3, scene 1, line 59-61). The sheer utopianism of the possibility of ending the progress of history and starting a new one narrated by a different voice is a baroque trait. However, all these three characters become harbingers of death. Barbin committed suicide. Dionysus is a revengeful god and Dan turns into a serial killer. Therefore, the baroque and capitalism once again merge in the play but to the disadvantage of capitalism.

Utopianism in *A Mouthful of Birds* is best seen in the character of Paul. Paul starts part seventeen of the play with an address to the audience: "that way we make more profit" (Churchill 1986, p.27). More profit is the motto of capitalism and Paul undeniably is a subject awed by the power of this system and tries to intimate himself with its ideals. While the first times that we meet Paul - in part five of the first act named *Profit*, and part seventeen of the second act - he is speaking in numbers and "reliable figures", in the last sections of the play he is a schizophrenic person desperately in love with a pig, which is to be slaughtered by his company as part of their meat exports. As a "financial operator addicted to work, long hours and the rush of power" (Harvey 1989, p.287) he develops schizophrenia. Paul in his final monologue has turned into a pseudo-ascetic and inactive person who is completely ready for

something lucky to come his way. “Days are quite long when you sit in the street but it is important not to do anything” (Churchill 1986, p. 52). Paul’s disillusionment leads him towards discarding the remnants of his past self, his wife and his job, but the philosophy he adopts is equally defective. “I cannot stand small pleasures. If there is nothing there’s room for something to come” (Churchill 1986). His passivity is very much a socialist as well as a baroque tendency to wait for a utopia.

The twentieth century like the seventeenth century, experiences a sharp increase in the number of social aspirations, and Paul is undeniably an ambitious man. Yet when aspirations do not meet achievement, the result will be dissatisfaction and melancholia (Maravall 1986, p.152). Paul’s loneliness – he has separated from his family and friends – and his melancholy, which reveals itself in his drinking scotch too much and denouncing pleasures of life for a dreamy big pleasure that he thinks will one day come by his way, are all baroque attitudes. The baroque attitude of Paul stands in opposition to the delusion of success capitalism has planted in his mind, through which Churchill once more censures the ethos of capitalism.

## CONCLUSION

When Dionysus was deceiving Pentheus to dress as a Bacchic woman to spy on the Maenads, he justified this cross-dressing with these words: “Hunt down evil by committing evil—that sounds like a wise way to proceed” (Euripides 2003, p.18). Committing evil could refer to cross-dressing but it also could refer to Dionysus’s act of deceiving Pentheus for his insolence to a god. The crucial issue here is not that Dionysus was taking revenge, but how he bent Pentheus’s will to wear a woman’s dressing and then walk in the streets of Thebes. Not only the Bacchic females, but also Pentheus was in a trance. When Agave woke up from her trance and discovered Pentheus’s head in her hands, she had forgotten what she had done or talked about to Cadmus. And truly trance is associated with forgetfulness; with the moment of severing the roots of physical experience and the consequent mental recollection. However, Churchill’s characters insist that they remember everything. In their trance, memory and substance retain their unity. The whole play is actually about unanimity of the corporeal with the metaphysical; whether this metaphysical means psychic breakdown or spirit possession or delusional fantasies. From any angle you look at the issue, this contingency is as much a postmodern tradition as it is baroque. Yet the very fact that characters claim sound mind in their moments of possession and madness, emphasises the desire of the play to propagate awareness of and sensitivity to the moments in history when people are awed by an ideological system. Postmodernism, as the cultural logic of late capitalism, however, hides this fact, while the baroque aspires to revolutionary revelations.

In *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill created a fairy world: the world of people possessed by the power of past convictions and verdicts; People who are mad with the world and are plunged in blind rage and violence. Nevertheless, their madness, more than being a result of specific locational resentments, is caused by a historic force that sought their exclusion from the records of the past and exerted upon them an identity which is not anything less than anonymity. In this fight, fragmentation is accompanied by a sense of continuity, surface made pregnant with deep meanings, dynamism set against ennui and space made nuanced to make possible a baroque strategy that could oppose the norms of capitalism. In spite of this, baroque techniques built their castle of opposition on the ground capitalism had arrested. Thus we witness strong visual elements having the upper hand than the words of the play, fragmentation leading in part to radical individualism, and utopianism inviting people to

enormous aspirations and consequently to huge despondency. Were opposition redefined as contingent antagonism, this play would inevitably deserve the title of an oppositional play.

<sup>1</sup>Elain Aston and Janelle Reinelt, *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

<sup>2</sup>Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Elain Aston and Janelle Reinelt, *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> Amelia Howe Kritzer, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991)

<sup>5</sup> Kerri Ann Considine, "An Implacable Force: Caryl Churchill and the "Theatre of Cruelty"." (Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Iris Joy Lavell, "Caryl Churchill: Representational Negotiations and Provisional Truths" (PhD thesis, Murdoch University, 2004)

<sup>7</sup> Laura Leigh Whitaker, " "Unstable Subjects": Gender and agency in Caryl Churchill's *Claude Nine*" (Master of Art's Thesis, Auburn University, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> Raima Evans, 'Women and Violence in "A Mouthful of Birds"', *Theatre Journal*, 54, 2 (May 2002), pp. 263-284

<sup>9</sup>*Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*

<sup>10</sup> Spanish playwright and poet during the baroque era.

<sup>11</sup> Bryan Turner in his introduction to Buci-Glucksmann argues that the baroque culture intentionally incorporated mass elements into its art works to create the illusion of freedom, while in practice it was feeding people with passivity and submissiveness. See Bryan S. Turner, Introduction to *The Baroque Reason* by Christine Buci-Glucksmann. (Sage publications, 1994)

<sup>12</sup> Lope de Vega, *perro del Hortelano (The Gardener's Dog)* (London: Támesis, 1981)

<sup>13</sup> *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Some art critics believe this sculpture depicts the Virgin at the peak of a sexual joy, and thus Bernini has downgraded the Holy Virgin to the level of Venus.

<sup>14</sup> Although modern England is a secular state, the writers believe the cultural heritage of a nation remains with its people, thus refusing the idea of total break with the cultural past. For a discussion on modern secularism which has replaced Christian metaphysical beliefs with modern science, and on the state of contemporary secular life see, Graeme Smith. *A Short History of Secularism*. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008). Max Weber's sociology of capitalism is also based on a historical characterization of modernity. See Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism* (1930)

<sup>15</sup> See David Kynaston, *City of London: The History*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) in this book, Kynaston details different aspects of change brought to London in the 1980s by Thatcherism.

<sup>16</sup> The first significant political upheaval that England experienced, just like other European nations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was the decline of papal power. Introduction of reformation into the Catholic states produced a medley of different religious sects each claiming access to truth and salvation. The second rift to which the article refers concerns the split of the Anglican Church from its historical ally in the government, the Tories. This split was largely a result of Thatcherite policies of individualism and capitalistic benefit seeking.

<sup>17</sup> Liza Filby, "God and Mrs Thatcher: Religion and Politics in 1980s Britain" (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2010). Filby in her dissertation on the political mien of England during Thatcher's government discusses the historical rift that occurred between the conservative Tories and "old Tories at prayer". While both the government and the church of England believed the basic ethos of English culture to be Christianity, practice proves large differences; the government was more inclined to act based on capitalist premises and to "Americanize" London, while the church preferred a more conservative attitude towards economic growth.

<sup>18</sup> In the 1980s the society was more inclined to left-wing politics and therefore too much individuality was denounced. What's more, Janelle Reinelt and Elain Aston and Elin Diamond, in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, discuss her affinities with socialism. In the same book, Dan Rebellato provides a quotation from Max Stafford-Clark, the director of many plays written by Churchill that shows she was recognized as a liberal as well. "Working collaboratively is often quite difficult, but with Caryl it was easy. As a socialist liberal feminist humanist she's absolutely committed to collaboration" (171).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted from Barrionuevo about chaos of life in Andalusia

<sup>20</sup> Raima Evans in her article 'Women and Violence in *A Mouthful of Birds*', draws our attention to this fact that the play is not an "endorsement of infanticide or murder in general".

- <sup>21</sup> Virilio, P. and Lotringer, S. *Crepuscular Dawn*, trans. M. Taormina, (New York: Semiotext(e), 2002)
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted from Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991)
- <sup>23</sup> A term borrowed from Michelle Foucault
- <sup>24</sup> *The Calling of Saint Matthews* (1599-1600) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio,
- <sup>25</sup> Guy Debord was a French Situationist International who believed industrial culture of capitalism, like baroque culture, manipulated its subjects and therefore produced people drowned in 'ennui'. He also believed that capitalism would finally see its end by a revolutionary uprising.

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